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Application of an intergovernmental organization for observer status with the Economic and Social Council

Letter dated 26 September 2003 from the Helsinki Commission addressed to the President of the Economic and Social Council

During the recent annual meeting of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), which took place at the Ministerial level, the HELCOM secretariat was requested to apply for observer status to the Economic and Social Council.

The Helsinki Commission is the responsible body for the overall implementation of the Helsinki Convention. This international Convention deals with protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea area. All coastal States around the Baltic Sea and the European Community are contracting parties to the Convention.

Request for status as observer

We hereby request that HELCOM be granted observer status to the Economic and Social Council.

In the light of recent developments and political initiatives and the changing focus of the Helsinki Commission, we find it important that we be able to participate in the work of the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions, in particular the Commission on Sustainable Development. It is also our hope that HELCOM can contribute to the work of the Commission.

Background information about the Helsinki Commission

The Convention

HELCOM is the governing body of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, usually known as the Helsinki Convention. HELCOM works to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea

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from all sources of pollution and to restore and safeguard its ecological balance through intergovernmental cooperation between Denmark, Estonia, the European Community, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Russian Federation and Sweden.

In 1974, for the first time ever, all the sources of pollution around an entire sea were made subject to a single convention, signed by the then seven Baltic coastal States. The Convention entered into force on 3 May 1980. In the light of political changes and developments in international environmental and maritime law, a new convention was signed in 1992 by all the States bordering on the Baltic Sea and the European Community. After ratification, the Convention entered into force on 17 January 2000. The Convention covers the whole of the Baltic Sea area, including inland waters, as well as the waters of the sea itself and the sea-bed. Measures are also taken in the whole catchment area of the Baltic Sea to reduce land-based pollution.

Organization

HELCOM meets annually. Ministerial-level meetings are held occasionally. The Commission unanimously adopts recommendations for the protection of the marine environment, which the Governments of the contracting parties must act on within their respective national programmes and legislation.

The chairmanship of the Helsinki Commission rotates between the contracting parties every two years, according to their alphabetical order in English. The working structure of HELCOM, supported by the secretariat, consists of the meetings of HELCOM, the heads of delegations, and the Commission's subsidiary bodies.

Participants

In addition to the HELCOM contracting parties, Belarus, Ukraine and several intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations participate in HELCOM meetings as observers.

Achievements

Since the beginning of the 1980s, HELCOM has been working to improve the Baltic marine environment, largely through some 200 HELCOM recommendations.

Successes during this period include:

- Lower discharges of organic pollutants and nutrients from point-sources
- A substantial overall reduction in the emissions of polluting substances from the 132 originally identified "hot spots" since the early 1990s, with about 50 "hot spots" deleted from the list
- Fewer beaches closed for bathing, thanks to improvement in the treatment of industrial and municipal wastewater
- Significant reductions in atmospheric nitrogen deposits
- Progress in the phasing-out of leaded petrol (more than 85 per cent of the petrol consumed in the Baltic Sea region is now unleaded)

- Dramatic reductions in emissions or organo-halogen compounds such as toxic dioxins and furans
- National regulations banning hazardous substances such as PCBs and DDT
- Stricter controls on industry (permits are now compulsory for industrial emissions)
- Improved joint monitoring of the state of the marine environment
- The recovery of seal and white-tailed eagle populations
- Improved special legislation to prevent the pollution of the Baltic Sea by shipping, developed together with the International Maritime Organization (IMO)
- Measures to eliminate all illegal discharges by ships into the Baltic Sea
- A major international plan to combat marine pollution, with active cooperation involving all the contracting parties through HELCOM

More information on HELCOM can be found on the Commission's homepage: www.helcom.fi.

I hope that the Economic and Social Council will accept our application and grant the Commission observer status as requested.

(*Signed*) Claus **Hagebro**
Secretary
Helsinki Commission